

# WHY GIRLS?

## WHY VIOLENCE PREVENTION?

“ This older man on the bus was murmuring in my friend’s ear and stroking her knee. She quietly asked him to stop and he quietly did not stop. I leaned over the aisle and said in the firmest voice I could manage ‘I think that’s enough.’ Suddenly the whole bus mobilized to get her out of harm’s way. It was amazing – although what also became clear at that moment was that many people on the bus had been aware of her discomfort, but no one had done anything about it, until I somehow created a point of no return, just by speaking up. Sometimes that’s all it takes.”

- Anna, Montreal, QC

“ It took a while until I realized I wasn’t the only one, and that it wasn’t my fault. I used to think, ‘this’ is just what happens, that the nasty words and hitting were normal.”

- Young Woman

Reena Virk could not “fit in” because she had nothing to “fit” into. She was brown in a predominantly white society. She was supposedly overweight in a society that values slimness to the point of anorexia, and she was different in a society that values “sameness” and uniformity. And she was killed by those who considered her difference an affront to their sense of uniformity.

- Yasmin Jiwani, “Reena Virk: The Erasure of Race”.  
Author of Discourses of Denial

## IMAGINE A GIRLS’ WORLD WITHOUT VIOLENCE

In that world, she feels safe to live her life as she chooses. She is free from physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, economic, racial, religious, and spiritual harm. She is safe to say, think, act, dress, and be where she wants, no matter the time or place. In a girls’ world without violence, she has equal access to opportunities, resources, and support that are responsive to her experiences.



GIRLS ACTION  
FOUNDATION

# WHAT DOES VIOLENCE PREVENTION MEAN FOR THE REST OF US?

It means:

Acknowledging that girls encounter violence in their lives

Understanding that there are many different forms and experiences of violence

Recognizing that violence is rooted in discrimination – racial, gendered, sexual, economic, and status discrimination, and also through abuses of power

Recognizing and naming violence in all its forms

Empowering girls and young women with information, tools, and caring individuals so they don't face violence alone

Working as individuals, with and within organizations, schools, and governments, to understand violence within the unique contexts and life experiences of all of the girls they serve

**The reality is that girls and young women experience a whole range of violence.**

**They are also surviving this violence and are taking action against it.**

**Our vision of violence prevention is that change *is* possible.**

By raising awareness on the issues and by supporting girls and young women with empowering tools and resources, we can all work towards reducing violence, not only in the lives of girls and young women, but in our communities, our governments, and beyond.



# A DEEPER LOOK AT VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

“ I think that violence towards Aboriginal women is perpetuated within society. It is not only one person making them feel worthless, actually, it's the generally accepted stereotype surrounding Aboriginal women that does.”

- **Young Woman, ON**

“ The only way we can talk about violence against any woman of any faith, race or culture in a way that recognizes the enormity of what we lose any time a woman is beaten, raped or killed by a man, is to remember, again and again and again, that it is not Islam, and it is not Muhammad Parvez, Robert Pickton, or Marc Lépine who we should reserve our rage for: it's our systems. And then keep fighting them.”

- **Thea, Deputy Editor, Racialicious.com**

“ Girls face barriers when trying to seek support for their encounters with violence. Lack of spaces for discussion on topics relevant to girls is one of these barriers. Many youth believe that they are to blame for their experiences of violence. Without spaces to unpack these assumptions, it leads to a lot of misinformation and stigma.”

- **Natalie, Community Organizer, Toronto, ON**

Poverty, racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppressions are rooted in social norms and stereotypes, media, laws, institutions, and public policy. This type of violence disproportionately affects disadvantaged people based on their race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other identity markers. However, to a certain extent, this violence is legitimized to the point of invisibility and affects most Canadian girls. It is often implicit and goes unrecognized.

- **Candis Steenbergen, Co-author of Girlhoods**

“ While it is not often obvious, our ideas about race, gender, class, age, and sexuality intertwine and play out in our everyday encounters. These ideas play out in the words we choose and do not choose; in the spaces we travel and those we avoid, and in the politics we live. We need to identify the ideas embedded in the stories that are told, heard, and repeated about girls and young women in our conversations and in policies. In this way, we can refute the ideas that promote harm, and also circulate, like a good rumour, those ideas that promote dignity.”

- **Nisha Sajnani, Popular Educator**

Although dating violence happens across genders, girls and young women face very specific forms, and a higher frequency of abuse at the hands of their partners. Justice Canada's 2005 Research Review indicates that young women are more likely to be abused by a partner, be victimized more frequently, and to experience more severe consequences from dating violence.

- **Department of Justice Canada, Dating Violence: A Fact Sheet**

Schools are a primary site of violence for girls. Intercultural tensions among young people are seldom understood as a manifestation of racist and patriarchal relations. Instead, media and teachers focus on finding remedies for “bullying.”

- **Nancy Janovicek, “Reducing Crime and Victimization”**

# WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

## WHAT WE KNOW

Girls and young women experience many forms of violence. Violence can be experienced internally (like shame, fear, self-injury, and eating disorders), and relationally (like physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal abuse, and/or racist, sexist, and homophobic bullying). Violence can also be experienced through our institutions and collectively held ideas (like policies, programs, and practices that permit and promote discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, age, or socio-economic status). These forms of systemic violence can then be expressed in relationships and result in internalized violence. We call this the violence continuum.

Violence can occur on one, two, or all three of these levels at the same time. The presence of one form of violence usually suggests the presence of the other forms.

Since violence against girls and young women is most often the result of many factors coming together at once, we stress the importance of recognizing that violence in girls' lives is complex and multidimensional, and needs to be understood from a holistic perspective.

Violence prevention cannot be the sole responsibility of girls and young women. Violence prevention also requires changes in adults, schools, programs, and policies.

Naming violence is powerful. Breaking the silence around violence is necessary because silence in itself is a form of violence. Building awareness of our tolerance of the violence in our institutions, our communities, and in our relationships is an essential first step to challenging it.

Creating an empowering and supportive space for girls and young women to get together and talk about their experiences of violence is important in breaking isolation. It allows issues of violence to be seen as a societal problem and not an individual problem. Such spaces empower girls and young women to find ways to take action against the roots of violence, while coping with lived experiences of violence. We also know that there aren't enough spaces like this.

We know that girls are uniquely positioned to lead change and promote violence prevention. Building girls' sense of personal power, self-esteem, and ability to advocate for themselves supports both violence prevention and healing.

“ We need to have violence prevention strategies that do not further victimize certain sectors of society. We need to talk openly about what's happening in different cultures, and come up with solutions that they'd like to see, while at the same time talking about the accomplishments and the many great initiatives that are strong and on-going in these cultures.”

– **Andrea, Youth Facilitator, Founder of Go Girls**

“ Little work is being done on dating violence in our community, which concerns the girls. For Valentine's Day, the Just Girls group set up an information booth at their school, providing resources and information (as well as Valentine's treats). The girls also handed out a self-created bill of rights for dating relationships called, “If you want to be my Valentine...”

– **Paige, Women's Resource Centre, Beamsville, ON**

“ During one of our sessions, the group decided that it was important to have the girls take the lead in discussions about violence prevention and violence in general. They understand what's going on and they should be the ones to come up with solutions that they can see working with the support of allies, family, and community members. As well, we decided that in order to talk about violence prevention, we needed to talk about the positive and wonderful things happening in our different communities to regain and reclaim a sense of pride in our cultures.”

– **Andrea, Youth Facilitator, Founder of Go Girls**

# WE SUPPORT VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH...

## POPULAR EDUCATION: GIRLS EMPOWERING THEMSELVES

The Popular Education approach emphasizes that learning is not a top-down process. It starts with what is important in the lives of each of us. In popular education, the main goal is to create positive social change based on the needs of those learning. Girls decide themselves what issues are important and they determine how to enact change.

Popular education:

- Validates girls' and young women's diverse experiences of violence
- Empowers girls and young women to recognize violence, name it, become familiar with resources, and strategize collectively to take action against it

## THE POWER OF GIRLS: ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

We believe in working from a positive-oriented perspective that emphasizes the strengths and capabilities of girls based on their own realities and experiences.

We celebrate and share in the initiatives and successes of girls who are engaged in speaking up, speaking out, and taking action on issues of violence.

## GIRLS & SOCIAL JUSTICE

A feminist approach to social justice recognizes that girls and young women:

- Experience unique and disproportionately high levels of violence
- Have different access to power and privilege
- Have different experiences of violence and that these experiences need to be addressed holistically

Racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, isolation, and much more are just a few influences that shape girls' experiences of violence. These forms of discrimination are also forms of violence in themselves.

## GIRLS MAKING CHANGE

Long lasting social change against violence requires an engagement - not only from the individual, but also from the community, its institutions, and society as a whole.

Girls taking action can be transformative. Girls Action supports girls' and young women's initiatives to enact change in their own lives, their schools, their communities, their government, and their worlds.

## ALL-GIRL SPACES

Gender-specific spaces for girls and young women provide special opportunities to share experiences of violence. These spaces break the silence and isolation around their experiences.

All-girl spaces create a sense of solidarity amongst girls in the face of violence.

Programs that deal with violence as it is mediated by homophobia, racism, classism, and ableism are scarce. Just as most programs tend to be gender-neutral, existing programs tend not to account for the specificities of the experiences of the interlocking effects of race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and gender. Instead, the realities and needs of Aboriginal, immigrant/refugee, racialized girls, young lesbians, girls with disabilities, girls in foster care, and poor or working class girls tend to be collapsed and universalized into a homogenous category of "girls" or "children."

- Helene Berman and Yasmin Jiwani, "In the Best Interests of the Girl Child"

# HOW YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

Offer all-girl spaces or moments that are facilitated by a diversity of women.

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Support girls and young women in becoming familiar with their rights to be free from all forms of violence. Explore these rights with them.

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Don't blame girls and young women. Understand the roots of violence and name the different forms of violence.

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Allow girls and young women to talk with one another and share their experiences in a supportive environment. This also means being able to respond with resources, referrals, information, and support.

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Listen and learn from the experiences of girls and young women.

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Create occasions to have critical discussions about violence. This can take form in many different ways, depending on the girls in your group:

- Promote dialogue about violence and how it occurs in girls' lives
- Encourage girls to express their ideas about violence through creative means (making a video, creating a magazine, through theatre or painting)
- Create opportunities for girls and young women to talk about their friendships and other relationships
- Consider the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Explore the links between violence and access to resources and support
- Investigate the connections between personal, relational and systemic violence
- Examine what lies at the root of bullying amongst girls

- Offer workshops on healthy relationships, communication skills, confidence-building, self-esteem, and anti-oppression
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View self-injury as a health issue rather than undermining it by calling it teenage rebellion.

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Affirm that girls are survivors of violence – not only victims.

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Work with and support girls to take action against violence.

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Be aware of the provincial laws and regulations surrounding disclosures of violence. Reflect on how you will follow these regulations. Know your responsibility and how to respond to disclosures of violence in a way that serves the safety of each girl. Know that you do not need to do this alone: find allies in organizations, community centres, school counsellors, etc.

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Be a voice. Make the realities of girls and violence visible. Become an advocate for girls and violence prevention. Get involved in other violence prevention initiatives.

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Support violence prevention work with boys groups.

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Collaborate with organizations that are doing work around violence prevention so that you can link the girls with resources and people to talk to. Think about including people from:

- Self-defense centres
- Rape relief centres
- Women's shelters
- School counselling services
- Legal clinics
- Health clinics
- Media-literacy programs
- Anti-violence advocacy groups, especially those that are youth-led

# WHERE YOU CAN GO FOR SUPPORT

## **THE GIRLS ACTION RESOURCE CENTRE**

A comprehensive collection of documents, websites, and organizational listings that can help you start and strengthen girls' spaces. It includes information and strategies in popular education, anti-oppression, violence prevention, facilitation, program design, and so much more.

## **AMPLIFY TOOLKIT**

Our user-friendly guide to creating and facilitating girls' programs. It includes a "how-to" Manual, a Workshop Guide, and even sections on healthy relationships and violence prevention.

## **WHY GIRLS?**

Check out our other Why Girls? publications on topics such as Leadership, Media & Pop Culture and Sexual Health.

## **OUR COMMUNITIES, OUR WORDS: STEPPING UP FOR RACIALIZED GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT**

A collection of reflections, action strategies, best practices, and resources from women who work with racialized girls and young women. It includes sections on violence prevention, health promotion, media and pop culture, and leadership.

## **YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION TOOLKIT** from the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Developed by youth for youth, this Toolkit provides information on how to recognize the early signs and different types of violence among youth, especially girls, as well as how to respond to violence. [www.nwac-hq.org](http://www.nwac-hq.org)

## **GREAT STUFF FOR GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN**

### **STEP IT UP: A YOUNG WOMAN'S GUIDE TO INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY**

A do-it-yourself guide for girls and young women who want to create media arts projects that make a difference. Inside, find "how-to's" on photography, cyber activism, spoken word, radio, and hip hop. There are also profiles of female media artists and online resources to get you started.

## **KICKACTION.CA**

Support connections between girls and young women through a website produced by and for girls and young women with something to say. Girls can read or write their own blogs, post questions or read what other girls and young women across Canada are saying about violence and violence prevention. [www.kickaction.ca](http://www.kickaction.ca)

DOWNLOAD ALL OUR PUBLICATIONS FOR FREE AT [GIRLSACTIONFOUNDATION.CA](http://GIRLSACTIONFOUNDATION.CA)

**KICKACTION.CA** is a bilingual online community for girls and young women who think for themselves, take a stand, and act creatively to bring positive change to their communities and across the globe. Kickaction.ca is a Girls Action initiative.

**GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION** is a national charitable organization. We lead and seed girls' programs across Canada. We build girls' and young women's skills and confidence and inspire action to change the world. Through our innovative programs, research, and support to a network of over 200 partnering organizations and projects, Girls Action reaches over 60,000 girls and young women.



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